

Pirates & Privateers

The Making Of A Privateer - Part I

by Robert Bachand

Long before the American Revolutionary War and beyond, privateering was frequently employed as an instrument of war by seafaring nations. But some early Americans regarded the ventures of private-men-of-war as repugnant and immoral...on a par with the activities of pirates. It was thus with great chagrin that one of their sons, often barely a teenager, would succumb to the lure of quick wealth and high adventure by signing on as a privateer. Advertisements for privateer crewmen frequently appeared in newspapers such as the one below from the *Boston Gazette* dated November 13, 1780:

**AN INVITATION TO ALL BRAVE SEAMEN
AND MARINES, WHO HAVE AN
INCLINATION TO SERVE THEIR**

COUNTRY AND MAKE THEIR FORTUNES
The grand Privateer Ship Deane Commanded by Elisha Hinman, Esquire, will sail on a cruise against the enemies of the United States of America, by the 20th instant. The Deane mounts 30 carriage guns, and is excellently well calculated for Attacks, Defenses, and Pursuit. This therefore is to invite all those Jolly Fellows, who love their Country, and want to make their Fortune at one Stroke, to prepare immediately to Rendezvous at the head of His Excellency's Governor Hancock's Warf, where they will be received with a hearty Welcome by a number of Brave Fellows there assembled, and treated with that excellent Liquor called Grog, which is allowed by all true seamen, to be the LIQUOR OF LIFE.

Andrew Sherburne, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, recounts in his memoirs the story of his older brother, Thomas, returning from sailing aboard the privateer *General Mifflin* with exciting tales of capturing 13 prizes and bringing home a small personal fortune. At the time, it was not uncommon for a youth to sign on as a privateer without a word to parents or friends – those concerned only learned of the lad's whereabouts if and when he returned from the sea. Writing to Caleb Davis, a Boston agent for privateers, Willis Hall inquired "Sir, I am informed that you are agent for the *Hazzard* and whereas my Son Willis Hall Jr was in Boston about ten days before said *Hazzard* sailed and since that time I cannot here anything from him but I expect he is gon a Privateering." There is no record as to whether or not Willis Hall Jr became a privateer or if he ever returned home.

Andrew Sherburne's father, a staunch Whig, abhorred privateering. Andrew was just 14 years old, but realizing the boy's intentions of following in his older brother's footsteps, the parent made arrangements for Andrew to join the crew of the Continental ship *Ranger* (the *Ranger* had earlier been commanded by John Paul Jones). Andrew's dad was on good terms with the *Ranger's* master, Captain Thomas Simpson, and two of the boy's uncles were crewmen also aboard the warship.

The 18-gun *Ranger* set out from Boston on June 18, 1779, in the company of the warships *Queen of France* and *Providence*. Sailing



Continental ship "Ranger"

north toward Newfoundland's Grand Banks, the ships often were enveloped in dense fog that could quickly dissolve into a clear blue sky. During the day, a crewman was always kept aloft on lookout. Sherburne recalled that "about seven o'clock one morning, the man at the fore-topmast head cried out a sail, a sail on the lee-bow; another there, and there." They had come upon a large enemy fleet of merchantmen with their escorts. The impending battle clearly made the teenager nervous. His assignment was assistant to boatswain Charles Roberts; the boatswain manned the third gun from the bow.

Moving in from the rear, the *Ranger* began pursuing the *Holderness*, a 20-gun ship. After exchanging just a few broadsides, the *Ranger* easily captured the better-armed but undermanned enemy vessel. Some of the *Ranger's* crewmen took control of the prize and within a short time, another ship was taken. By then, night had fallen, but the *Ranger* continued to stalk the fleet, sometimes finding herself surrounded by the enemy. The American ship remained undetected. "We could distinctly hear their bells on which they frequently struck a few strokes that their ships might not approach too near each other"... recalled Sherburne. In time, Captain Simpson decided to fall back to the rear of the fleet and trail it from there.

On the following morning, the skies were overcast with large fog banks staggered across the sea. The *Queen of France* and *Providence* were nowhere in sight and the enemy fleet, when visible, was sailing in a tight formation. There were no stragglers that could present an easy target. That evening, however, the *Ranger* was able to single out a brig and quickly capture it. Fog continued to plague the hunt into the early hours of the third day, but as it lifted, three ships came into view. Finding themselves discovered, they sailed close together as if in defense, but as the *Ranger* drew closer they promptly parted. The cargo aboard the first captured vessel proved to have little value, but its captain related that the other two, which were also unarmed, were laden with rum, cotton and

sugar.

The chase was on! When the American vessel closed in on the second enemy ship, two large warships, under full sail, appeared on the horizon. Showing English colors, one was making its way directly for the *Ranger* while the other headed for the *Ranger's* first prize of the day. Captain Simpson chose to ignore the impending danger and continued to give chase to the two other enemy merchantmen. As he came alongside the second cargo-carrying vessel, the captain ordered her to keep under his stern while he pursued the third ship; there was no time to transfer part of his crew to take control of the latest prize. By then however, the warship sailing under English colors had closed in. Then, much to the relief of the American crew, a signal from the warship's bridge indicated that she was actually the frigate *Providence*! In the confusion, the second-captured merchantman managed to break away and, assuming that the *Providence* was English, sought out protection from her. To the dismay of the enemy's captain, the *Providence* showed its true colors and ordered merchantman to haul down his flag and come under his stern. The other warship that had given chase to the first prize proved also to be friendly; she was the *Queen of France*. In all, during the approximately six-week cruise, 10 of the enemy's vessels were taken, but two were later recaptured by the British. The eight remaining prizes, manned by American crews, were sailed into Boston Harbor where they and their cargoes were sold and shares of the profits were distributed to the crewmen. Andrew Sherburne headed home a seasoned sailor, who was still shy of his fifteenth birthday. He would spend a short leave with his family recounting his adventures to his younger, wide-eyed siblings before returning to the sea.

The September article will conclude the *Making of a Privateer*.

